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THE WHITE HOUSE CRISIS

A Fantasy Breeds a Scandal

The moral certainties of Reagan's B-movies lead to the White House mess

BY GARRY WILLS

Ronald Reagan is just as bewildered as we are, and with better cause. He was just doing what we wanted him to do, living out our fantasies. He was our amiable Rambo, a nonthreatening avenger on reassuring terms with Armageddon. He would destroy the Evil Empire, yet not get us into trouble. His moral clarity not only redeemed but made irrelevant his fuzziness about reality.

There was no better place to find moral clarity, in 1940, than the darkness of a movie theater on Saturday afternoon. There the B-films sorted out good and evil, with the help of government agents like Brass Bancroft. In that clear darkness, heroes worked for law and order but did so by their own rules. In a script for one of Reagan's appearances as Brass Bancroft, "Chief Wilson" tells him: *"It may become necessary for you to break the law, but you will be doing so at your own risk, with no hope of official intercession unless your life is at stake—in which case your value to the service will have ended."*

Though Bancroft belonged to the Secret Service, he was working in this case for a presidential task force: *"Our President has planned to coordinate all detective forces of the Treasury, Justice, State, War, Navy and Post Office Departments, in a concerted drive to spike the maneuvers of foreign spies, saboteurs and provocateurs."*

Four times Reagan played out the Bancroft fantasies which, paired with films like Gene Autry's or Roy Rogers's, filled up the afternoons of borderland pubescents. In "Murder in the Air," Reagan played a T-man (T for Treasury) posing as Agent 685 in a terrorist ring. Reagan was not only a secret agent in the movies. As a real FBI informant, he was given the code name T-10 in 1947. His assignment was to inform on board members of the Screen Actors Guild. His brother, Neil, says that he, too, was an FBI informer at the time, one who would "lay around in the bushes" to see who attended leftist Hollywood parties. In Neil's version, the FBI's instructions resembled those given Brass Bancroft: "And always remember, if you get caught in the bushes, you can just forget about saying, well, you're doing this for the FBI, because we'll



In the movies he was Brass Bancroft, a Secret Service agent who sorted out good and evil

just look him right in the eye and say, 'We never saw the guy in our lives.' Even the reality was a fantasy, but it was edging toward the world of Lt. Col. Oliver North.

One of Ronald Reagan's first acts as president was to set in motion the pardoning of two FBI officials who had been convicted of breaking the law to spy on American citizens. Informer T-10 saw nothing wrong with that. By the end of Reagan's first term, the CIA was mining harbors and passing out assassination pamphlets to Nicaraguan rebels. When two CIA employees lost their jobs in the dispute over those activities, they moved

to new ones with White House help: Colonel North found them places, one of them on the NSC staff. Things too daring even for the regular spies could be trusted to the White House's own national hero.

Reagan dearly loves a hero—in sports, in war, in various secret services. So nearsighted as to be blind when it came to handling a ball, he was precluded from most sports as a child. He became a cheerleader. He and his brother were the head cheerleaders at Eureka College. His sportscasting days were a prolongation of the cheerleading and took mainly the form of anecdotes about sports heroes. During World War II his eyes again kept him from the action, but he became a cheerleader for military heroes—for the fighter pilot whose dying colloquy with a wounded gunner he has quoted for years (though no one else was there to hear it), for the black sailor who singlehandedly integrated the armed forces (years before the actual integration). Reagan made himself a hero only after the fighting was over: in his own version of the war, he filmed Nazi death camps. What did he know about World War II, and when did he know it? He knew what he wanted to know, and he knew it as soon as he had said it. We knew that all along. We wanted to believe

his stories, even if we only half-believed them. We licensed his beguiling forgeries.

Why did we ask Reagan to be responsible for the world's safety but not accountable for ordinary truths? Because accountability—the dull keeping of a record, with its chains of procedure—is too like government. Reagan assured us that government is the problem, not the solution. Heroes break the rules, defy procedure, are accountable only in secret to their moral leaders. Thus government is at its best when it is the FBI, and the FBI is at its best when it is breaking the law. If government (in this case, Con-

gress) is so blind as to make such noble action impossible in the FBI, then the action must find a new home, above the FBI. The president must call on his special task force, on Brass Bancroft.

As governor, Reagan felt he had a positive mandate not to govern. This did not mean that things would not get done. Rather, they would get done *because* Reagan went around the government to call on "creative" private interests. Reagan believes that government can act nobly only when it goes outside channels—i.e., when it goes against the very genius of government, which is accountability. In California he called in businessmen to do what mere committees could not. When he wanted a lawyer for state business, he borrowed one from a movie studio. When he wanted a governor's mansion, his friends supplied it, without suffering the state's cumbersome procurement procedure.

Reagan brought the same attitude with him to Washington. Presidents-elect are given a transition fund for preparing themselves to take office. Reagan's was the same sum as Carter's had been—\$2 million (of which Carter returned \$300,000 to the government). Reagan's friends, headed by Edwin Meese III and William Casey, privately raised an extra million dollars to finance a transition that relied on nongovernment groups planning the "Reagan Revolution." When the money was raised, it was to be tax-free and accountable. But after the Inauguration the trust refused requests by the comptroller general and the General Accounting Office to find out how it had been spent. The extragovernmental forces try to do their benevolent work in secret. It was a small but symbolic beginning for Reagan's presidency, one that fit well with his pardoning of FBI criminals.

We trusted Reagan not to misuse the irregular powers he assumed—he was too like us to betray us. That was his moral warrant. But there is plenty of evidence from his California and his Washington days that people acting on their own initiative betrayed him, taking advantage of the irregular procedures he had declared "creative." Seven high officials from his administration have already been indicted. A whole string of top aides has resigned under pressure or raised the issue of special prosecution. Yet Reagan never felt betrayed or showed indignation at the shortcuts taken by businessmen. The script had its villain (government) and its heroes (businessmen), and actual events could not alter Reagan's storytelling bias.

We licensed that, too. During the 1982 recession Reagan's own people brought him Wall Street experts to shake him out of his euphoric belief that everything was still going well. He could not be shak-

en. He boasts of his optimism, which is impervious to evidences of disaster. It is an attitude prized in itself and nurtured. Reagan does not work well, we are told, unless he is "up." It is a performer's instinct, which the performer's intimates bolster. Bad news either does not get to him or is rejected if it does. A



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cheerleader cannot, by job definition, be allowed to lose his cheer. There are rituals for getting him "up" before public appearances or conferences, or meetings. Donald Regan has an aide deputed to find a joke a day for the chief of staff to tell the president, as a mood setter. A joke a day keeps disaster away.

Optimism as an imperative, combined with narrative fantasy as a taxonomic device, leads to grandiose versions of what has been done or can be done. From his own account of it, Reagan's terms in California made that state a heaven on earth. For every grotesque anecdote about

Washington's welfare system, he has a fairy tale of rescue or reconciliation in California. In either case, Reagan thinks in stories; each concludes as neatly as sports anecdotes were in his broadcasting days, with no loose ends, no entanglement in larger processes of causation. Integration of the armed forces is just one man's heroic story on one dramatic day of the war.

For someone of this mentality, the rescue of hostages, the bombing of terrorists, the support for freedom fighters are all appealing stories, each in its own right. All of them can be indulged, so long as the heroes are acting individually for the right motives, outside the duller logic of policy connections. The stirring, compassionate, heroic possibilities are all that the storyteller emphasizes—or all that he sees.

Reagan became a cheerleader for the "national hero" types, the Brass Bancrofts in the White House. He admired their moral intent, and that was all that mattered. People who natter on about details are simply, in his eyes, missing the point. They talk past what is so obvious to him. The performer who has stayed "up" by denying unpleasant facts becomes at last incapable of dealing with facts at all. Controlling a crisis is impossible for one who cannot recognize a crisis.

Some have talked of putting Ronald Reagan under oath to find out the truth about White House transactions with Iran and Nicaragua. The fecklessness of that proposal can be seen from a study of Reagan's testimony the last time he was under oath. That was in 1962, when a federal grand jury was examining the questionable activities of the Screen Actors Guild under Reagan's presi-

dency. Over and over again Reagan made it clear that he did not know what was going on when he was the Guild's president. The tone of his testimony is not unfairly caught in this response: "And all of this, including the opinions of myself, is vague at the Guild on everything that took place for all those years all the way back including whether I was present or not." What did the president know? He does not know.

Garry Wills is author of "Reagan's America: Innocents at Home," just published by Doubleday & Company Inc.